

Be mindful of coder fatigue and work environment to foster optimal performance

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Coding requires perfection, and with perfection comes a variety of different sources of stress at work. Of course, we are all human, and we all make mistakes. However, work-place fatigue can certainly exacerbate the possibility of coding errors.

Fatigue takes a physical toll on coders, and it also increases the potential for errors. This can lead to financial loss, and it can also increase the likelihood of errors that can put patients at risk due to a misdiagnosis on their records and/or insurance claims. Discovering and correcting these errors costs employers their time and resources.

To minimize careless errors, HIM directors should be mindful of the environment in which coders work.

Assess coders' wish lists

Directors and managers should carefully consider the conditions under which their staff members work, and they should brainstorm ideas to help ease some of the stress. Consider providing the following:

Sufficient space. Everyone wants ample work space so they don't feel cramped and stressed. But coders need extra space for other reasons, such as to ensure the privacy of protected health information. Coders need to review notes and other sensitive patient material, so directors should ensure that co-workers sitting nearby are not able to view each other's computer screens. Also, coders often meet with providers to discuss chart audits and other matters, and these conversations should certainly take place in a quiet area that ensures confidentiality.

In addition, coders usually need to use large manuals and reference materials. Many coders are also required to keep hard copy records of all their audits and other records. This all requires space.

Recognition. Coding can be a solitary task that involves working with papers and computers. Coding managers and HIM directors tend to be busy with meetings, teaching, and other managerial duties. However, it's also important to take the time to show an appreciation for all of the hard work that coding staff members perform. Everyone enjoys hearing sincere expressions of appreciation.

Quiet working environment and adequate breaks. Coding requires a quiet environment. Constant chatter can be very distracting, and it can disrupt the concentration that is essential for correct coding, auditing, or researching. If it is impossible to provide a quiet area in which coders can work, consider providing ear plugs to help ease potential distractions.

Encourage coding staff members to take adequate breaks. To help ease eye fatigue, coders should remember to frequently look away from their computers to give their eyes a rest. Coders should also get up from their seats at least once each morning and walk around for a few minutes.

Resources and reference materials. Many coding employees provide resources, such as coding education, in the form of workshops and audio conferences for continuing education units as well as personal development. Some even cover travel expenses. Most also provide all necessary work-related coding books and software.

When coders know they have all the tools they need to work effectively, this can help to ease some stress, which in turn, reduces coder fatigue. Coding software can also help alleviate physical strain because it prevents coders from needing to move and look through large and heavy coding manuals. Most coders find a combination of coding books and software works best for research and confirmation of codes.

Complete documentation. In a perfect world, all documentation is complete and accessible. However, in reality, this is not always the case. Managers and directors should have a policy in place so coders can alert them when there is an issue with missing or incomplete documentation. Should the need arise, the manager or director can step in to advise the coder and help secure the necessary documentation. When coders know their manager or director will support them with a solid plan of action and emotional support, this helps ease the stress of provider-coder confrontations regarding documentation.

Tips to fight coder fatigue

Encourage coding staff members to do the following to help prevent coder fatigue:

Don't skimp on sleep. How much sleep does a coder need to be alert and effective during the day? The answer depends on the individual, but most adults should aim for seven to eight hours every night.

Move around more for extra energy. Fitness is a great antidote to fatigue. Unfortunately, most of us perform our jobs in front of a computer while sitting at our desks. If a coder is already experiencing fatigue, it might seem too much to ask for him or her to expend extra energy moving around, but ultimately, it is what's best for his or her health.

Drink a lot of water and stay hydrated. Drinking enough water every day is very important to combat fatigue. The human body is 70% water; muscles are 75% water; body fat is 50% water, and bones are 50% water. Many health experts recommend that we drink at least eight, 8 oz. glasses of water, or other hydrating liquid, every day.

Eat for energy. Even though we know better, many of us head to the vending machine for crackers or candy bars when we are hungry. Instead, encourage staff members to consider healthy snacks (e.g., yogurt, fruit, whole grain crackers, nuts) that will fuel their bodies without giving them a blood sugar crash that often

follows refined carbohydrate consumption.

Reduce stress. Everyone experiences stress to some degree. Physical reactions (e.g., heart races, muscles tighten) occur because of the 'fight or flight' response or the perceived threat our body is experiencing. Excessive stress can result in burn-out or a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion. Encourage staff members to engage in strategies (e.g., deep breathing techniques, meditation, yoga) to help relieve their stress.

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